

Prolegomena
to
An Econo-Aesthetic Evaluation
of
Damien Hirst's Late 20th Century Masterstroke
"The Physical Impossibility of Death...&c"



Rosalva Alisebirac

Edited by

Quentin Edward Dunraven

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I have not read Camus, so I am certain he got it right:

We humans are absurd. More or less. Give or take.

- L'Gardinier Riche

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Introduction (25 years later)

Our story circles around a tiger shark in Australia, which specimen was purchased for £6,000 by Dame Ian Hirst.ⁱ Then followed the alchemy that is Art, thanks to a particular cultural zeitgeist and the financial support of a gallerist-*mécène* named Charles Saatchi. Metamorphosis began by naming the shark *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, a concept commissioned in 1991 for £50,000. The concept was submerged in a vitrine of formalin, and, in 1992, mounted in the now-legendary exhibition of Young British Artists (MBAs).ⁱⁱ This famous fish (and its double) floated Deiman Hirst to fame and fortune.

In 2006, owing to deterioration, replacement of the original shark became necessary (which fact led to intricate epistemological questions, discussed *infra*). With a new shark in the old vitrine, *The Physical Impossibility of Death... &c* was loaned to the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. During its residency (2007-2010), Hirst's *magnum opus* received mixed reviews and a lot of name-calling and stuff like that from arrogant self-appointed arbiters of reactionary aesthetic sensibility, including the late Australian, Robert Hughes:

*The world's most over-rated marine organism... This poor, sad, wrinkled former shark... It's just an inert bit of inedible fish... It's a comedy, but it's a kind of tacky comedy, too. ...It functions as a commercial brand for the king of the Young British Artists. It's a clever piece of marketing; but, as a work of art, it's absurd. So why is it in the museum? ...Is it here to raise its value by association with the Met?*ⁱⁱⁱ

That a man from Down-Under should raise such a question is unsurprising, but to have similar doubts raised by French critics? According to one cultural theorist among the Hexagon's many fans of Jerry Lewis:

« Les critiques d'art britanniques n'ont pas été tendres envers cette rétrospective de Hirst. On lui reproche de se répéter, de surfer sur de vieux concepts et de vouloir s'enrichir davantage en vendant une multitude de produits dérivés à fort prix à la boutique du musée... Et le sempiternel débat autour de Damien Hirst de reprendre de plus belle: fait-il de l'art ou du commerce? Est-il un artiste de génie ou un génie du marketing ? »^{iv}

The French rhetorical mode of disputation notwithstanding, The Question among British critics is not whether Hirst is an artist of genius, but whether Hirst is an artist *at all*. It is nevertheless possible to discern one point of universal agreement: this particular Young British Artist is able to swim (the crawl) in commercial waters.

A Postmodern Masterstroke in Context

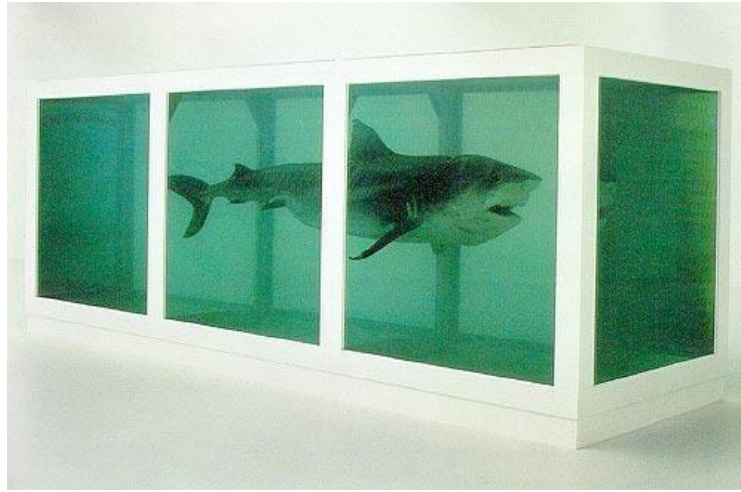


Photo: Le Monde

The Young British Artists are the heirs of Marcel Duchamp. Since the 1960s, the zeitgeist of the art world has been imbued with (if not informed by) the assumptions, operations, and strategies of *dada*. Here, the waters in which Hirst swims get murky. Why, because *dada* was understood not to be Art, at all. *dada* was anti-art – the negation of the very notion of art. This is clear from Jane Bakewell’s interview with Marcel Duchamp, recorded shortly before his death in 1968, and in which he acknowledges his perplexity given the status of his *oeuvre* and its absorption into the master narrative of art history, which, before his eyes, had conflated anti-Art with Art. In the end, Duchamp’s stated intention(s) went for nothing, in stark contrast with Hirst’s remarks as to his own intention (see below: *Reiteration* and endnote VII).

As every conceptual artist knows, the process of selection is the *sine qua non* of the Duchampian System. It is the artist who selects and, through selection, transposes found objects, raising them to the metaphysical plane. As Tracy Emin, Y.B.A., has stated: “It’s art, because I say it’s art.” This premise is conceptually tenable. Debate begins with those who do not share the assumption underlying this particular solipsism; consequently, conceptual artists such as Emin must continue “in a severe contest ‘twixt intelligence, which presses forward, and an unworthy, timid ignorance that obstructs progress”. Better, then, to press on to the concept itself...

According to *The New York Times* (2007): “The shark is simultaneously life and death incarnate in a way you don’t quite grasp until you see it, suspended and silent, in its tank. It gives the innately demonic urge-to-live a demonic, deathlike form.” This critical perspective of *The Times* may prove to be more perceptive than Mr. Hughes’s unworthy obstruction.

In color, the vitrine is aquamarine. This *green-blue* privileges an otherwise excluded middle that exists between a traditional binary opposition: namely, that of *blue-as-blue* and *green-as-green*. The negation of this opposition has implications. For example, aquamarine conjures lush desert isles and the spiffy uniforms of the Miami Dolphins with their perfect season in 1972. Thus, this pastel color manifests a quantifiable alternative perfection that affirms/denies, *simultaneously*, the classical Greek conception of Blue Death. According to Jigme Gaga Khan, past director of The Golden Horde Cultural Centre: “Mr. Hirst’s strategy of incorporating aquamarine is the necessary first step in deconstructing the institutionalized values of an invasive and colonizing Occident, since it’s hardly an accident that the shark was shipped from a former *penal colony*. Nor should we forget that, although this really is much too obvious to mention, the reactionary Mr. Hughes is an escapee from that colony. What I mean is, he should have known better. Don’t you think?”

From Concept to Sketch to Maquette

In 2003, under the title *A Dead Shark Isn't Art*, the Stuckism International Gallery in London exhibited a shark that previously had been on public display in JD Electrical Supplies, a shop owned by Mr. Eddie Saunders. The Stuckists were asserting that *The Physical Impossibility of Death...&c* was fabricated two years after Hirst saw Mr. Saunders's display.



Photo: Wikipedia

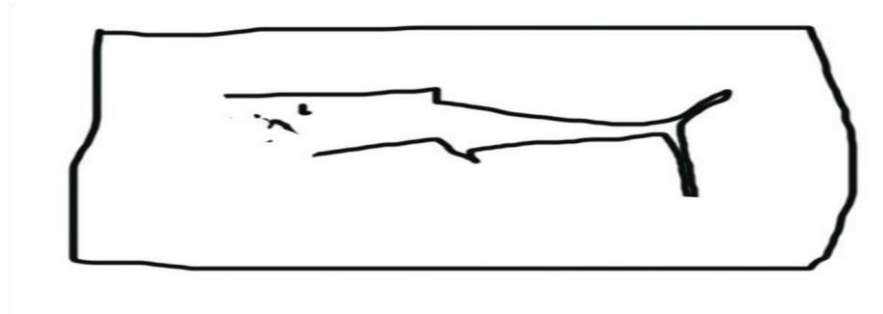


Image courtesy of Pannini Galleries Ltd

Whatever the source of inspiration, the realization of the concept appears to have passed through various incarnations, from tentative doodles upon Internet café napkins to full-blown sketches upon cigarette paper (see image above). A shark pendant cut from sheet metal (à la Calder) and spray painted aquamarine, as well as a shrimp on a toothpick, have been retrieved from a trash bin in Shoreditch; but, neither of these works, nor the studies on paper, has been authenticated by the artist.

Certainly *The Physical Impossibility of Death...&c* has predecessors. One cannot confront the fish without recalling the controversial *Piss Christ*. As some believe the fish to be an emblem of the Primitive Church, this historical resonance could not have been lost upon Hirst, whose studio assistants fashioned *Piss Guppy*, a maquette at 1/100 scale – a theme to which Hirst returned later – that temporarily closed the allusive hermeneutical circle until it was blown open by the tiger shark, a quite different kettle of fish from the Beatitudes transmitted to the saintly Fishers of Men. Indeed, in this context, the jagged, nervous line of the shark conveys an inquisitional threat.

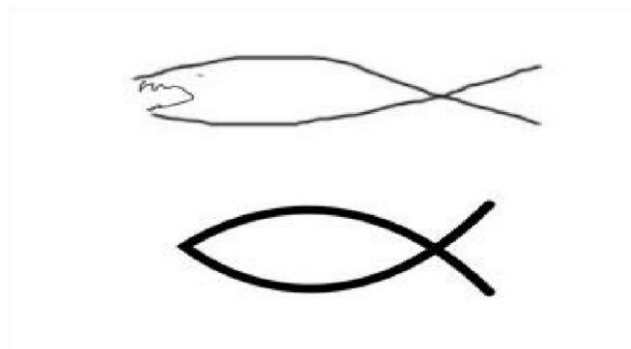


Image courtesy of Pannini Galleries Ltd

An affinity exists between Duchamp's *Large Glass (The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even)* and *The Physical Impossibility of Death...&c*. The two works share transparency, a see-through sensibility that collapses the opposition of *inside/outside* by integrating *the environment* into its frame *as a totality* of compositional elements emerging from and through the very nature

of the materials themselves. Both works embody a contradiction: they are static yet change constantly in accord with the aleatory inherent to their environments, as people pass, lighting fluctuates, and flies leave random specks here and there.^v

In re Materials, Labor, and Maintenance



Photo: BBC

A catalogue provides this description of *The Physical Impossibility of Death...&c* :

Glass, steel, and tiger shark in 5% formalin solution

Dimensions: 213 cm × 518 cm × 213 cm

Consider: An adult tiger shark is 10 to 14 feet (or, 3.25 to 4.25 meters) in length, and from 850 to 1,400 pounds (or, 385 to 635 kilograms) in weight. This is the usual range; larger specimens do exist. For our purposes (based upon a length of 5.18 meters for the vitrine), the size of the tiger shark under discussion^{vi} is 12.3 feet (or, 3.75 meters) in length, and perhaps 560 pounds (or, 254 kilograms) in weight. [Note: Both approximations are likely one-eyed guesstimates.]

The budget for producing the piece was £50,000 in 1991. The shark itself cost £6,000. As for other materials, below follows a consideration of unit prices and quantities required, beginning with the vitrine (tank):

$$213 \text{ cm} \times 518 \text{ cm} \times 213 \text{ cm} = \mathbf{23,501,142 \text{ cm}^3}$$

$$\text{Unit conversion: } 23,501,142 \text{ cm}^3 = \mathbf{23,501 \text{ liters}}$$

$$\text{Price of Formalin per liter} = \mathbf{\$21.30}$$

$$(\text{derived from Formalin 10\% - unit of 20 liters} = \$426)$$

Thus, to fill the vitrine with formalin (10% histological grade) requires 23,501 liters at \$21.30 = \$500,571 (or, £400,456), approximately.

[Note: Pricing appears to be roughly the same for the formalin 4% histological grade. Given his budget, Hirst appears to have used a 5% solution of lower grade or availed himself of a donation.]

What of the shark? Consider: With shark fin soup selling for \$80-100 per bowl, a whale shark pectoral fin may cost \$100,000 (£80,000), while a basking shark pectoral fin can go for as much as £200,000. Hirst purchased a whole shark for £6,000, including the fins.

Again, the stated cost of producing the completed work (in 1991) was £50,000. Without taking into account the expenses of shipping, labor, and additional materials (e.g., glass and steel), the costs to fabricate *The Physical Impossibility of Death... &c* appear to exceed the stated budget by something just under half a million dollars. More or less. Give or take.

“The Physical Impossibility of Death” on the Block

Eric Hebborn, the proprietor of Pannini Galleries, once observed that “Art should be appreciated for what it is, *not* for what it isn’t.” He was referring to the fluctuation in valuations dependent upon attribution. If a painting is attributed to Rembrandt, then it will carry greater value than it would were it attributed to the School of Rembrandt. Art consumers understand this point rather better than philosophers of aesthetics who proffer evaluations based upon historical significance or the quality of line and coloration; that is, “intrinsic values” that end in never-ending dispute.

Besides, criteria may change before one’s eyes, so that, rather than privileging the quality of line in a 16th century pen and ink study, the tech-minded art consumer of an advanced civilization may privilege technical innovation over old-hat aesthetic considerations: for example, the first watercolor sketch to incorporate whole blood in depictions of the Spanish Civil War; or a Pop

depiction (a portrait, otherwise) of *The First Integrated Circuit* silk-screened with a new mesh designed for use in the NASA program, rendered in colors resistant to the atmosphere of Mars.

At the same time, art consumers speculate in emerging brand names. A recent publication, *The Guinness Book of Art Auction Records* (Ark Press) suggests that Art is only worth what someone is willing to pay. Consider: A work by Vincent van Gogh that sold for \$200 in the 1920s is today worth millions because someone has been willing to expend millions to acquire it. To assert that a particular work is /priceless/ is to assert nothing. Were the world's first trillionaire to purchase the Sistine Chapel, we would understand that *The Last Judgment* is worth something less than the selling price for the entire facility – and the addition of an Olympic-sized swimming pool would only increase its market value. In 1992, the Young British Artists' *mécène* surely understood this natural law: It is auction houses which establish artistic worth. That is to say, the *Marketplace*, which is the final arbiter in every aspect of life in advanced mercantile cultures. Nevertheless, anomalies occasionally present themselves (as happens in all dynamical systems) despite the clear-eyed precision of quantification. This need not be bothersome, although it may seem that certain questions simply refuse to resolve at higher levels of theory.

For example: *The Physical Impossibility of Death...&c* is, of course, heavily restored. The shark has been replaced. Here, an analogy might be made with some /priceless masterpiece/. Imagine, if you will, a lacuna in Leonardo's *La Gioconda* – perhaps a void, with Mona completely missing because an art lover threw acid at the canvas. Art restorers would then repaint the crossed arms and graceful hand, re-delineate the eyebrows, apply fresh rouge to the cheeks, and, with utmost care, re-establish the famous smile. Voilà, we again have the *Mona Lisa*. Or do we? If someone traded this restored picture straight across for the Sistine Chapel, would its value be affirmed?

Valuation always and everywhere raises issues, and it tends to be based upon either supply and demand or uniqueness and rarity. Consider: As supply might easily meet demand for urinals, is Ducamp's *Fountain* in any sense rare or unique? Is *The Impossibility of Death...&c* in any sense unique, given Mr. Saunders's display; or is it in any sense rare, given that any replacement shark will do? Suppose we were to compare the price per pound of canned shark meat with the weight and current market value of Hirst's *The Impossibility of Death...&c*. Now, suppose that the same canned shark meat had been selected by Andy Warhol.

An analogy with comparative shopping might provide further amplification:

In 2008, the average price of **albacore** tuna was \$1.14 US per pound; although, in previous years, the average price ranged from \$0.61 to \$0.98 per pound. But not all tunas are equal.

In 2013, at auction in Tokyo, the selling price of a single blue fin tuna was \$1,760,000 US, which was \$3,603 per pound. However, in 2015, Mediterranean blue fin tuna sold for around \$30, while fresh Pacific blue fin tuna was selling at \$3 US per pound. Fresh. That's the rub and here's the

big question: Why was the blue fin tuna sold *in Tokyo* more expensive than the blue fin tuna sold *in the US*? Moreover, in the case with the US, we are talking about *fresh* tuna, in a country where *canned* blue fin sells for \$15-to-30 (for 10-to-15 ounces). Are other factors in play? In late 2012, the canned tuna was attributed to the School of Andy Warhol.

Consider: Hirst's shark sold for \$12,000,000, which value represents an exponential increase above Saatchi's initial investment of £50,000 in 1991. How might this be explained? Has Hirst's concept become inflated in value, or might other indicators demonstrate the existence of some intangible?

Obviously, the selection process and branding come into play, and this situational zeitgeist is the mental space in which Emin's remark gathers coherence. Otherwise, who would attend whether she says *this* or *that* is Art? Clearly, market value is what focuses the attention of the mercantile culture upon interviews with Emin. Further implications are discussed below.

Reiteration in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction



Photo: Wikipedia

Death Denied (2008) a later work, exhibited in Kiev

According to Wikipedia: A [philosophical question](#) was acknowledged by Hirst, as to whether the replacement shark meant that the result could still be considered the same artwork. He observed:

"It's a big dilemma. Artists and conservators have different opinions about what's important: the original artwork or the original intention. I come from a [conceptual art](#) background, so I think it should be the intention.^{vii} It's the same piece. But the jury will be out for a long time to come."

Hirst has made other works which feature a shark preserved in a vitrine of formaldehyde. For example, in September 2008, a tiger shark entitled *The Kingdom* sold at Sotheby's for £9.6 million (£3 million above estimate). Whatever Hirst's jury decides, this piece is obviously not the same work as the replacement piece (which may be seen as art restoration). Reactionaries argue that *The Kingdom* is necessarily a replication of his original intention, because it is not, in any sense, a work of restoration. However, this myopic view misses the telling reiteration of Hirst's self-aware comment upon the nature of reproduction itself. Conceptually speaking. After all, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* exists in a scaled-down version (10 x 3.5 x 5 cms) – a guppy in formaldehyde – produced for The Miniature Museum (Netherlands). This modest work, together with less self-conscious parodies (e.g., the window display at the Stuckist's International Gallery), attests to Hirst's continuing influence upon himself and, of course, others; indeed a nascent School of followers, imitators, and/or replicators.

Of course, the question of influence often requires caution. According to Wikipedia: "In several instances since 1999, Hirst's works have been challenged and contested as plagiarized, both in written articles by journalists and artists, and, in one instance, through legal proceedings which led to an out-of-court settlement."

The current art world – auctions, galleries, museums, collectors, investors, speculators and, of course, artists – is a closed, self-perpetuating system. Were we to make a critique of this system in terms of its own assumptions, what would obtain? To further this analysis, we must conflate the assumptions of conceptual artists, art consumers, and auctioneers, then continue to examine aggregate costs in terms of labor, thus far excluded from the discussion. A clearer understanding might come of the most speculative scenario conceptually tenable. Consider:

The Impossibility of Death...&c would not exist without the evolution of the tiger shark in the vitrine. Obviously, this individual did not fabricate itself but is instead the result of a long line of individuals that made a continuing contribution that began sometime in the Devonian, about 400 million years ago. This lineage might be conveniently conceptualized as the Constant Shark, in which case we may speak of self-fabrication. After all, Hirst did not make the shark, nor did any studio assistant. What then would be the value of this Constant Shark, in 1991, after 400 million years – assuming that Constant Shark was paid a living wage for fabricating itself?^{viii} Given that one year (of 365 days) equals roughly 8,065 hrs. and that the minimum wage in 1991 was \$4.25 (in the USA), the amount owed Constant Shark would compute as follows: 400,000,000 yrs. x 8,065 hrs. x \$4.25/hr. – which figure (without compounding interest) equals roughly half the US Federal debt at present levels (\$23 trillion).

However, Hirst got away without paying Constant Shark a penny, because there was no minimum wage in UK until 1999, when £3.60 was established.

To summarize applicable expenditures: Cost of the formalin: £400,456; cost of the shark: £6,000; estimated air freight: £20,000; cost of steel and glass: £50,000.

TOTAL EXPENDITURE: £476,456, on a budget of £50,000.

By deducting the costs of materials, etc. from the price brought at auction, the current market value of Hirst's original concept is remaindered. Price at auction: £9,600,000 (\$12,000,000); [Costs - £ 476,456]; Remaindered conceptual value: £9,123,544. More or less. Give or take.

Still... Among the many knotty issues raised by this provocative piece, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, one final question might be raised: What of the Australian fisherman who accepted the commission to catch the shark?^{ix} Is he to be denied his status as a studio assistant? More: as he selected the found object (*i.e.*, caught the fish), is he not then truly an Artist? Lastly, given his unique and significant contribution to the execution of a piece of late 20th century conceptual art, might he not make application to the Royal College of Art in the firm expectation of being accepted?

ENDNOTES (Quentin Edward Dunraven)

ⁱ Cf. Marcel Duchamp's alter-ego, Rose Selavy.

ⁱⁱ Typographical error: (MBAs) should read (YBAs) signifying Young British Artists.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Hughes, *The Mona Lisa Curse* (2008) at 00:35:55–00:37:30.

^{iv} Marc Cassivi in *La Presse* (date unknown); accessed 29 March 2017 on-line.

^v Thereby referencing John Cage.

^{vi} That is, the original shark and not its replacement.

^{vii} If Duchamp's fate is any guide, then it is the */artwork/* and not the intention that takes precedence. With the downgrade of intention follows the downgrade of conception, a reduction which undermines the basic assumption of the entire enterprise, unless Duchamp's original distinction between anti-art and art is maintained. In this latter case, anti-art would resume its valid role and critical distance, and our world would be ever so slightly more coherent, and therefore slightly less absurd, however sub-atomically small the mitigation. Not that any of this matters in a barren, godless eternity filled with nothing but waste, horror, and degradation forming a useless bleak straightjacket in a black, absurd cosmos (to reiterate the late Woody Allen).

^{viii} This process entailed considerable research and development, including the making of prototypes, the conducting of trials, etc.

^{ix} Interesting to note that no UK animal rights activists have protested this installation, which features a shark that died for the sake of art, in conformity with a special order. It is unknown whether a similar arrangement was made in respect of the miniature installation requiring a guppy.

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